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AUTHOR	Schuyler, Gwyer
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ABSTRACT

Although most educators agree that the primary goal of education is student achievement, many believe that this goal has become incongruent with the way that educational institutions function. Community college professionals, in particular, have taken the lead in proposing a new paradigm of learning for the educational process. This digest will review the arguments and recommendations of supporters of the "learning paradigm" which involves a holistic and system-wide shift from the existing instructional paradigm to place the goal of learning first in all policies, programs, and practices. This requires the following: (1) judging institutional success in terms of the quality of student learning; (2) sharing responsibility for learning between students and colleges; (3) developing seamless delivery systems that provide access to educational services; (4) viewing the institution itself as a learner; (5) creating environments that let students discover and construct knowledge for themselves; (6) implementing new learning technologies; (7) hiring faculty whose primary responsibility is designing learning methods; (8) implementing cross- or non-disciplinary teams of specialists working to increase student competency; (9) providing individualized education that involves mastery of intellectual frameworks, rather than short-term retention; and (10) developing organizational climates that emphasize student learning. Enough challenges exist to bringing about this new paradigm, including entrenched time- and place-bound educational systems, active support for the movement among promoters of educational technology and the technology industry itself make it more likely that these reforms will be implemented. (BCY)

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ERIC ® Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

University of California at Los Angeles
3051 Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521
(310) 825-3931

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A Paradigm Shift from Instruction to Learning

by Gwyer Schuyler

In the hearts of dedicated education professionals is the belief that the primary goal of education is student achievement. However obvious this may seem, some believe that the goal of student learning has become incongruent with the current way higher education institutions function. A new paradigm of learning has been proposed and discussed largely among community college professionals.

While there are vocal supporters of the concept of the "learning paradigm," some critics question whether it is actually a paradigm at all. Perhaps the recommended changes could instead be simply described as reforms of the current system that lead to a greater institutional focus on student learning outcomes. Nonetheless, community college professionals interested in student learning may be informed by these recommendations, whether or not they comprise a paradigm shift. This Digest will review the arguments and recommendations of supporters of the learning paradigm.

A New Paradigm of Student Learning

Increasingly, movements to consider student outcomes, to improve student assessment, and to refocus institutional missions onto student learning are gaining prominence. Some see these changes as signs of a potentially larger systemic shift in paradigms, away from what has been labeled the "instruction paradigm" toward the "learning paradigm" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 13). Paradigm shifts occur when "difficulties or anomalies begin to appear in the functioning of the existing paradigm which cannot be handled adequately" and when there exists "an alternative paradigm that will account for all that the original paradigm accounts for. . . . and [that] offers real hope for solving the major difficulties facing the current paradigm" (Barr, 1995). Problems under the existing paradigm have been highlighted by a wave of criticism beginning in the 1980s. One such critique by the Wingspread Group identified the main issue confronting higher education as the mismatch between what American society needs and what it is receiving from the higher education system. To keep up with the acceleration of change in new information and technology, the Wingspread Group recommended that American workers be educated to levels that maximize their productivity. "In short, we need to educate more people, educate them to far higher standards, and do it as effectively and efficiently as possible" (Wingspread Group, 1993, p. 4).

Advocates of change see the present structures as inadequate to meet changes in work, knowledge, and citizenship while serving a greater number of students with diverse backgrounds and educational objectives. Under the current system, many students are "weeded out" of higher education, and of those who do graduate many are lacking important skills (Wingspread Group, 1993). The learning paradigm has been proposed as a framework or a set of principles enabling these problems to be solved.

The learning paradigm is more than incremental changes in an institution's organizational procedure or priorities. Rather, it involves a holistic and system-wide change away from the instruction paradigm and the organizational structures that reflect it. The purpose of the learning paradigm is to "place learning first in every policy, program, and practice in higher education by overhauling the traditional architecture of education" (O'Banion, 1995-1996, p. 22). This shift in perspective requires numerous changes:

- Judgment of institutional success on the quality of student learning;
- Shared responsibility in student learning between the college and the student;
- A seamless system of delivery, "providing access to educational services for learners as they need them, when they need them, and wherever they need them (Wingspread Group, 1993, p. 19);
- The vision of the institution itself as a learner in that over time, "it continuously learns how to produce more learning with each graduating class, each entering student" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 14);
- An institution that "creates environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves" instead of one that merely transfers knowledge from faculty to student (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 15);
- The continual identification, development, testing,

implementation, and assessment of a range of effective learning technologies including new applications of computer and information technology;

- Faculty whose primary responsibility is the design of learning methods and environments, with less emphasis on the traditional responsibility of instruction especially in the form of lecturing;
- Cross-disciplinary or nondisciplinary teams of specialists who work collaboratively to devise programs to increase student competency;
- Education that is tailored to the needs of individual students;
- Education that involves "the mastery of functional, knowledge-based intellectual frameworks rather than the short-term retention of fractionated contextual cues" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 22); and
- An organizational climate that fosters the belief that student learning is the central objective of all employees of a college - no matter if they are faculty members, financial officers, or administrative assistants.

Challenges

Many of the changes listed above have been implemented in the past and are, indeed, in place today. However, whether the integrative and system-wide transformation of higher education to the learning paradigm will occur is questionable since many of the traditional administrative and instructional structures are steadfast and deeply entrenched. Dominant paradigms are not easily changed due to the fact that teachers and administrators have been trained and students have been schooled within the old paradigm (Boggs, 1995-1996).

O'Banion (1996) suggests that the "key challenge for those who wish to launch learning colleges is the redesign of the current learning environment inherited from an earlier agricultural and industrial society - an environment that is time bound, place bound, efficiency bound, and role bound" (p. 1). To wholly implement a learning-driven system, the entire structure would require reform, including: the measurement of units of learning based on knowledge instead of time spent in class; the reconceptualization of instruction beyond the traditional classroom model; the redirection of administration away from issues of resources and reputation and toward issues of student success; and the redefining of the very concept of efficiency and production itself in higher education from cost per hour of instruction to cost per unit of learning.

Will a System-wide Paradigm Shift Occur?

In spite of the challenges that this shift undoubtedly represents, there is a vocal and active group of supporters of the learning paradigm. For example, promoters of instructional and computer technology are advocates of reform; they are aware of how these innovations stand to play an integral role in the curriculum and pedagogy under the learning paradigm. The private sector of the technology industry recognizes the opportunity that the learning paradigm would present for the incorporation of innovative instructional technologies. Partnerships between the technology industry and community college associations are being forged to address the subject of technological change as a catalyst for learning (Johnson & Lobello, 1996). If advocates continue to promote these reform efforts and colleges see the need to change their methods of instruction and learning, it is more probable that new approaches to teaching and learning such as those described in this Digest will be implemented.

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